

Policy briefing from Sustain Alliance, Landworkers Alliance, Soil Association, Organic farmers and Growers and other public interest groups*

Agroecology: Why we need an amendment on agroecological whole farm systems in the Agriculture Bill

We are seeking support for the proposed amendment to Clause 1 to be tabled at Report Stage to increase the amount of land under agro-ecological practices. The amendment is as follows:

amendment 1 page 2, line 8, at end insert—

(h) establishing and maintaining whole farm agroecological systems.

amendment 2 page 2, line 23, at end insert—

““whole farm agroecological systems” include any whole enterprise system for farming or land management which is designed to produce food and/ or fuel while delivering environmental and social benefits, and may include organic farming.”

This amendment enhances the Agriculture Bill because:

1) Agroecology integrates food production with delivery of environmental and social public goods. This amendment would provide support for farms to continue to produce food, which is essential to a secure domestic food supply, whilst delivering public goods. An agroecology scheme would give current farmers support and incentives to farmers to transition to ecological farming models, which produce food at the same time as restoring nature, and contributing to a food system that provides fresh and nutritious food for all.

2) Farmers will be rewarded on a whole farm basis - not only for “*managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment*”, as in point (a) of clause 1, but for doing so across the whole farm in an integrated manner. Agroecological whole farm systems can deliver a higher level of benefits such as, in the case of organic farming:

- 50% more wildlife than conventional farms;
- healthier soils with 44% ave higher levels of humic acid – which stores long term soil carbon;
- 35-65% less nitrogen and
- no persistent pesticides leached from organic arable fields.

These benefits are delivered in an integrated manner as a part of the whole farm system, rather than only on the margins.

3) Delivering social benefits. If Agroecology is specified as a Bill purpose, the government could develop schemes which deliver social benefits as a part of the farm system. Farms might be supported to provide public access to nutritious food, for example through community farm projects where low income households can buy fruit and vegetables, or public access to learning about where their food comes from, and how to cook it, which could support improved public health or schemes to improve the quantity and quality of jobs. Such social cohesion and public health outcomes are not currently in the bill. This amendment differs from current sub clause 1 (a) because it integrates other objectives.

What is agroecology ?

Agroecology is a set of guiding principles to encourage whole farm systems that deliver environmental and social public benefits. Ideally it would underpin all farm support delivery. Organic farming is a legally defined and proven agro-ecological approach that delivers multiple public goods. Support for organic farming is the most direct way that government can deliver environmental benefits through whole farms systems.

Agroecology is a wider umbrella which encompasses a wide range of initiatives, which increase the social and environmental benefits of farming to enable increased access to good food for all.

Agroecological approaches involve practices such as using composted manure instead of artificial fertilisers, pasture feeding livestock, longer crop rotations with better provision of seeds for birds, integrated pest management, agroforestry, maintaining hedgerows, and selling directly to local communities. Depending on the local context, there are broad ranges of whole farm techniques that work together with measures to encourage wildlife whilst also producing food and delivering social benefits.

Using agroecology as a guiding principle would provide government with a clear pathway for future support to farmers to deliver a broad range of public goods across the whole farm. This support could be directed towards training farmers, capital grants for the infrastructure investments required to transition to agroecological farming systems, and significantly increased research into agroecological farming systems.

Does this fit with the transition to public money for public goods?

Yes. Support for agroecological farming systems fits with government aspirations to support the delivery of public goods. Adoption of this amendment would mean that farmers will not only be paid for individual public goods delivered in specific areas of a farms such as the margins, but also for changing practice and impact in the middle of the fields. A whole-farm approach may also be easier to monitor, compared to measuring multiple, individual public good outcomes.

Is this a subsidy for food production?

No, farmers will not be supported for producing food per se. They will be supported through targeted funding and policy for the widespread adoption of agroecological systems so farms continue producing food whilst delivering publicly desirable outcomes. Without this amendment all the financial assistance provided for in the bill could go to 'edge of field' measures, potentially producing undesirable outcomes, such as incentives to stop producing food altogether.

What does this amendment do that is not already in the Bill?

The current Bill fails to support whole farm systems in delivering public goods in an integrated manner. Whilst agroecological farms, including organic could get start-up funding under section 1(2) of the bill and certain agroecological approaches could get funding under sections (a), (c), (d), (e), (f) and (g) of clause 1, support for whole farms systems to deliver public goods on an on-going basis is not explicit anywhere in the bill.

Why should this be in the Bill rather than secondary legislation or policy?

This Bill is the foundation on which the secondary legislation and policies will be built so they need to develop with this guiding principle. The whole farm plans proposed for the Environmental Land Management scheme may not result in whole farm systems for delivery of public goods. The approach needs to be in primary legislation so that it consistently guides all secondary legislation. It also ensures that the Agriculture Bill will be configured to feed into the emerging National Food Strategy, designed to ensure everyone access to healthy affordable sustainably produced food.

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The [UN Food and Agriculture Organisation](#) (FAO) describes agroecology as “the basis for evolving food systems that are equally strong in environmental, economic, social and agronomic dimensions.... Agroecology is based on applying ecological concepts and principles to optimize interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system. By building synergies, agroecology can support food production and food security and nutrition while restoring the ecosystem services and biodiversity that are essential for sustainable agriculture. Agroecology can play an important role in building resilience and adapting to climate change.”

The UN FAO and a growing number of countries have embraced agroecology. In October 2018, the highest governing body of FAO, consisting of 192 members, [adopted a resolution](#) to endorse the ‘10 elements of agroecology’ and to request partners to scale up agroecology around the world. The French government has made agroecology the central plank of their agriculture policy, setting ambitious targets for converting farms through policy incentives, training, research and new entrants programmes.